
Patron-driven acquisition at Glasgow School of Art Library

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This article reports on a five-month pilot of staff-mediated patron-driven acquisition (PDA) of e-books. Glasgow School of Art (GSA) is a specialist higher education institution, and its library serves approximately 2,000 undergraduate, postgraduate and research students, and 300 staff. The library's print collections comprise around 60,000 books in art, design, architecture, and related subjects. During 2012–13 the library received funding for a major refurbishment, and in preparation for this, a stock-weeding exercise was undertaken, which led to a 13% reduction in the collection and a commitment to a 'steady-state' physical collection development policy¹ because of continued limited space for expansion.

This focus on space, together with the need to place the entire lending stock into inaccessible storage for the refurbishment, provided the impetus for the trial adoption of e-book PDA. We wished to address student concerns about the unavailability of material during the refurbishment, and, in the longer term, to work in partnership with staff and students to expand our e-book collections. For a number of years, a popular 'suggest for purchase' system has been in operation to enable students and staff to recommend print-book purchases using an online form on the library website, and it seemed logical to build on the success of this. While we continue to regard print books as vital for our students, who take much of their inspiration from browsing the library shelves, we see some potential for e-books to provide multiple access to the more theoretical, text-heavy content with which they are also expected to be familiar, and which is often in high demand. We had several years' limited experience of using e-books as a result of an additional annual budget allocation of £5,000 to support an

expansion in the school's postgraduate courses and to provide our readers with access to content outside our core opening hours, and had already purchased around 200 e-book titles.

For the PDA trial, we considered a number of e-book platforms and vendors, including Dawsonera, ProQuest's Ebook Library, EBSCO, Ebrary, and Coutts' MyiLibrary. We opted for Dawsonera, in part because we had a good existing relationship with the company for the supply of both print and e-books, but also because as a small institution with a very limited budget, we were attracted by the low-risk and low-cost ability to purchase individual e-books, rather than packages which might have swamped our catalogue with large numbers of possibly redundant titles. Two further advantages of Dawsonera were the ability to provide unlimited concurrent views, and no requirement for us to deposit any funds up-front.

Having selected a vendor, our next step was to complete a profile that recorded the Dewey ranges, publishers and publication dates that we were interested in. Based on their experience with other institutions, Dawson had suggested to us that, given our relatively small size, we should aim to generate no more than 5,000 PDA titles with which to populate our catalogue. Our first attempt produced 10,000 titles, and it took several further adjustments before we managed to hit our target.

We then set the various 'triggers', which would be used to create an e-book request or purchase by a reader. A variety of combinations can be used, including a five-minute preview, or a set number of previews, rentals or purchase suggestions. We had set aside £3,000 of our annual e-book budget of £5,000 for PDA but, concerned that over-enthusiastic users might spend this very quickly, we decided to disable the auto-purchase mechanism and instead allowed users to place a purchase suggestion in the form of an email following the expiry of a five-minute preview of the book. Purchase suggestions would also be automatically generated following four separate five-minute previews. To provide ourselves with additional reassurance, we set an overall budget limit for our PDA purchases, with a warning flag if and when the limit was approached.

The next stage was to import a small sample of PDA MARC records into our Talis Alto library management system, and to test that the data appeared correctly and did not affect the integrity

of any existing catalogue records. We experienced a number of problems relating to the import, and found this part of the process difficult and time-consuming. A further challenge was that the sample records had to be removed manually, which was a repetitive and time-consuming task. These problems made us cautious when uploading the 5,000 PDA titles, so we undertook this in batches of 1,000 records, allowing time between each import to test the data thoroughly.

PDA titles that are not currently part of the collection appear in our OPAC with the shelfmark 'online resource – suggest for purchase', and contain a 'view online' link which, for authenticated library users, leads to both a five-minute preview of the book and an option to suggest it for purchase via an online form. All purchase suggestions are aggregated and an email is generated each week to the academic liaison librarians for approval. The email includes contact details for the user requesting the book, together with any additional background information or justification that they may choose to submit. Library staff can also view and process purchase suggestions at any time via the Dawsonera administrator portal.

The staff workflow for dealing with purchase suggestions is straightforward. Suggestions can be grouped into a batch and submitted online, following which the e-book becomes 'live' and available to users, usually within a matter of hours, and its PDA catalogue record is amended to reflect its new status and availability. When the reader next logs in to Dawsonera, they receive a notification at the top of their screen that the book is available. To reinforce this message and to endeavour to ensure that the book is used, the academic liaison librarian also emails the user when the book is purchased with the URL of the e-book. While this may seem like unnecessary extra work, it is worth bearing in mind that communication with users regarding the fulfilment of their print- and e-book requests was identified by Reynolds² as a significant area of dissatisfaction in a survey of patron-driven acquisitions at Texas A&M University.

Five months since taking our first 'baby steps' towards PDA, the system appears to be working smoothly and proving affordable. Despite not announcing the PDA pilot, in order to avoid any skewing of purchases, we are experiencing a slow but steady trickle of requests as users discover PDA e-books during OPAC searches. Thirty-eight books have been suggested via PDA during the five months of the pilot, with a total cost of

£1,471.48 and an average price of £38.72 per book. Our perception had been that the cost of e-books was typically around £60–£80, so we were pleased by this figure. There has been no evidence that the system is being abused by over-enthusiastic individuals, and because we carefully set the parameters when establishing our initial profile, all but two of the requests were aligned with our collection development policy.

Analysis of usage has revealed that the 36 e-books that we purchased (two PDA suggestions were rejected and the reader redirected to a nearby library) were downloaded 58 times, and read online 51 times. We had expected a higher preference for downloading content, which appears to be the norm in other institutions. The biggest surprise was that six of the titles (requested by a total of five users) had not been accessed at all, which was particularly disappointing given the efforts we had made to contact personally each user who had placed a purchase request. This finding was in sharp contrast to Dahl's³ assertion that 'PDA virtually guarantees that what is purchased will be used at least once'.

A further interesting statistic was the number of e-books that users had discovered via the OPAC, previewed for up to five minutes, but not subsequently suggested for purchase. A total of 147 books were accessed in this way, with a total purchase value of £5,021.40, or an average of £34.16 per book. Bearing in mind that our PDA budget was so small, we felt that our decision not to allow automatic purchases was fully justified. We are therefore likely to continue mediating requests, especially as this has not proved onerous and enables the academic liaison librarians to see what is being suggested by readers. However, mediation does slow down the process and this may contribute to the non-usage of some PDA requests. We intend to address this by checking for purchase requests on a daily, rather than weekly basis.

Overall, we have been pleased with our experience of PDA and will continue to use it, but it is clearly not going to be a 'game changer' for either library staff or users at Glasgow School of Art. The continued importance of printed books in our subject areas, and the need to devote the bulk of our book fund to developing our physical collections seems unlikely to change in the near future: a survey by McLure,⁴ which looked at the subject categories in Ebook Library (EBL), found that architecture represented just 0.53% of available titles, and fine arts 4.39%, compared to, for example, business at 18.03%. While publishers

may increase the number of e-books in art, design and architecture, the willingness of our students and staff to engage with them remains in flux.

NOTES

- 1 <http://www2.gsa.ac.uk/library/pdfs/Collection-Development-Policy.pdf>
- 2 L. J. Reynolds, 'User-driven acquisitions: allowing patron requests to drive collection development in an academic library', *Collection management*, 35 (2010), pp. 244–54
- 3 C. Dahl, 'Primed for patron-driven acquisition: a look at the big picture', *Journal of electronic resources librarianship*, 24:2 (2012), pp. 119–26
- 4 Merinda McLure and Amy Hoseth, 'Patron-driven e-book use and users' e-book perceptions: a snapshot', *Collection building*, 31:4 (2012), pp. 136–47